

Integrating the voices of ordinary people in the understanding of Well-being

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Abstract

The aim of this communication in the II Scientific Meeting in Psychology is to present some of the research, that is being done at the University of Évora, around the construct of Well-being, and to discuss the importance of integrating the voices of ordinary people in the understanding of Well-being. We will invite and argue for qualitative research that includes and facilitates our research participants' thoughtful contributions about Well-being, in a rigorous and systematic way. We will also briefly discuss some findings of a previous study, about former psychotherapy patients perspectives about Well-being, to empirically illustrate our thoughts.

Keywords

Well-being; psychotherapy outcome; qualitative research; eudaimonic Well-being; hedonic Well-being

Introduction

Well-being is a core construct in life and therefore it is discussed outside the frontiers of psychology in areas such as philosophy, economics, or environmental sciences and, is a construct, that has an impact on the definition of health and developmental policies (e.g. Fujiara & Dolan, 2014; OECD, 2011). Recently, in United Nations General Assembly the importance of “ensuring healthy lives and to promote the Well-being for all, in every age” was defined consensually as one of the “17 Goals for a Sustainable Development” for the near future (United Nations, 2015).

If Well-being is conceptualized as a goal to achieve, or as an indicator of development, it is relevant to discuss this concept and defining what Well-being really is.

In Psychology, the definition of Well-being is complex, since it may either be more related to the psychological functioning, or to affects and emotions. Different perspectives about the human nature, and how to live, about the importance of Happiness and the importance of Meaning (Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker & Garbinsky, 2013) have originated two research and theoretical traditions about Well-being: the *eudaimonic* tradition and the *hedonic* tradition (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryff & Singer, 1998; Wong, 2011).

A full discussion of the Well-being substantial empirical work is beyond the scope of this presentation. It is important to state though, that the literature on Well-being reflects different definitions, conceptualizations, and research strategies enlightening at the same time the complexity of the construct (Seligman, 2011) but also the need for more conceptual and theoretical clarity. Addressing that need, Henriques, Kleinman and Asselin (2014) proposed a *Nested Model of Well-being* that incorporates four related but differentiated domains. The first domain is the subjective Well-being, including the phenomenological Well-being; the second, the domain of the individual psychological

functioning and mental and biological health; the third domain of Well-being refers to the physical, environmental and social context where the individual lives and; the fourth domain, regards the values and ideology of the evaluator.

This last domain underlines the evaluative nature of the construct since, as the authors of the Nested Model have pointed out, the notion that one has about the nature of the world, and of what it is to have a good life, grounds the epistemological context in which an evaluation of the individual Well-being is made. So, considering a more holistic construct of Well-being implies contemplating more, besides Happiness or Subjective Well-being, namely, health and functioning, the environmental context, and also the individual values and ideology. The individual values and ideology, or the voices of common people and their perspectives, have been rather absent from the empirical Well-being literature (Jongbloed & Andres, 2015) nevertheless, an exploration of ordinary people views and perspectives, could be enlightening.

Looking at people perspectives' about Well-being may be particularly relevant since it allows for an open exploration of Well-being multiplicity of meanings in different contexts, and more importantly, it facilitates a comprehension that may leave the researchers frameworks or research traditions about Well-being on the background (McLeod, 2011) and more importantly, it facilitates the emergence of the person's views and understandings about their own Well-being. But, exploring people's ideas about Well-being is assuming the importance of the role of an introspective process into the subjective evaluation of Well-being. This evaluation allows the revaluation and revalorization of the experiences, and it permits the free and active agency of people in deviating from more objective or external scores about their experiences. Finally, it values people's authority in relation to experience, reflecting and valuing their lives different aspects (Alexandrova, 2005) in order to reach an evaluation of their own Well-being.

Another argument to the significance of listening to the ordinary people's perspectives about well-being is based on considering each person as a major and active contributor to their own processes (e.g. Bohart & Tallman, 2010) and Well-being, and therefore, her or his insights, based on experience and knowledge, are essential in understanding how Well-being is related to her or his experiences and live events.

Although each person may have a different perspective about their own Well-being, common aspects may be found, and we may conceive areas where the exploration of the persons' experience of Well-being may be particularly relevant. Recently, we have been developing research about the person's perspective about Well-being regarding 4 processes: Well-being in the developmental process of aging; Well-being in persons diagnosed with obesity or excessive weight; Well-being in children and finally; Well-being in the psychotherapeutic process. To the best of our knowledge, the voices of these persons have been, systematically, infrequently heard preventing to potentiate their contributions to the theoretical conceptualization of Well-being and of the psychological interventions to enhance it.

Until now, we have been defending for research that generally uses the voices of ordinary people in order to broaden the understanding of Well-being. Although not explicitly, it is also an invitation for the integration of a qualitative approach in our studies of Well-being, one that allows to explore, describe and understand people's complex experiences, as the complex experience of Well-being, in their live contexts.

As an example, we will present some findings of a study aimed to explore and comprehend how psychotherapy contributes to Well-being, in the perspective of former patients (Vaz-Velho, 2016). We will focus on how this study made possible to explore meaningful dimensions of former patients' Well-being, and to enlighten and illustrate the nature of the relation between psychotherapy and Well-being.

Integrating people's voices about Well-being and Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy outcome studies have been traditionally focused on symptomatic improvement and only more recently they started to integrate other aspects such as improvements on life and social functioning, and Well-being (Orlinsky, 2009). Well-being has been pointed out as a relevant type of outcome of psychotherapy to be considered (Slife, 2004; Wampold, 2013) and that it could be argued that there is a call for psychotherapy research that contemplates psychotherapy, also, as a search for a meaningful life, that is full and worth living (Deurzen, 2009).

We (Vaz-Velho, 2016; Vaz-Velho, Ferreira, & Vasco, 2017) looked at patients' perspectives on Well-being as an outcome, considering that it could be particularly relevant since it allowed for an open exploration of Well-being multiplicity of meanings in the context of the psychotherapeutic process. Also, the exploration of patients' perspectives had been signalled as a significant research gap in general psychotherapy research, and had been advocated to be crucial in complementing the research on psychotherapy outcomes (Hill, Chui, & Baumann, 2013).

In-depth interviews were carried out with 16 adults, former psychotherapy patients. The design of the study and the analysis used a *Grounded Theory* (GT) approach (Dourdouma & Mortl, 2012). Generally, the interviews explored the positive or negative impact of psychotherapy on Well-being, as well as other factors that may have contributed to their perceived Well-being; the subjective definition of Well-being; former patients' explanations about how, what happened in psychotherapy, promoted or reduced the sense of Well-being, providing illustrative episodes when possible.

After transcription, each interview was sent to each participant for feedback, and the transcripts and patient feedbacks were analysed following the principles of an hermeneutic version of GT (Rennie, 2006) to identify the common aspects of the experiences, but also its variety and uniqueness. Different credibility checks were incorporated in the study, namely through the involvement of an external analyst.

From the several results presented and discussed (Vaz-Velho, 2016; Vaz-Velho, Ferreira & Vasco, 2017) we want here to underline two aspects relevant for our present discussion: one regards the definition of Well-being and, the other, the complexity of the construct.

The most relevant dimensions of former patients' Well-being included a sense of peace, equilibrium and serenity; a sense that life has a meaning and that the meaning is given by close and important relations; happiness; daily small pleasures; freedom; openness towards life and the experience of living in the present. Nonetheless, each participant had a specific, and personal way of describing Well-being.

These results are important to our present discussion as more than a-half of the participants referred a dimension of Well-being related to peace, serenity and equilibrium and that dimension is almost absent from the main psychology models of Well-being (c.f. Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryff, 2014) and have only a marginal role in Positive psychology, which is mainly focused on happiness and hedonic Well-being (Floody, 2014). These results also reveal how ordinary persons may contribute to our understanding in unexpected ways.

At the same time, in other dimensions, the perspectives about Well-being fit beautifully with different psychology models. More than half of the participants defined Well-being as a sense of meaning that emerges from interpersonal close relationships, which is consistent with *eudaimonic* models of Well-being, models that presuppose a dimension in Well-being that values good interpersonal relations (Ryff, 2014) or proximity (Deci & Ryan, 2008). And the Well-being's definitions as happiness (Diener, 2012) and, as being able to have pleasure in daily life (Epstein, 1993) are closer to a *hedonic* perspective. In sum, the study of the people's perspectives about well being can contribute to the discussion and empirical validation of the construct of Well-being.

Another relevant finding of this study is that it revealed the complexity of studying Well-being during a process, the psychotherapeutic process, and pointed out to 3 different aspects that will enlighten our comprehension about Well-being in future studies (Vaz-Velho, 2016) .

The first one is the importance of longitudinal evaluation of Well-being along the psychotherapy process, since it fluctuated throughout and, when very low, could even be responsible for therapy drop out. The second one is the need to evaluate not only general Well-being but also specific dimensions of Well-being, since we found out that they are not always related: due to therapy people may evaluate to have had improvements in specific dimensions of their Well-being, for instance in their work context, but that, did not necessarily meant, that they considered that their general Well-being had enhanced; and finally, the importance of integrating the person's subjective perspective about Well-being, and about the ways in which the psychotherapeutic process can enhance it. If we believe that enhanced Well-being is considered one desirable outcome of therapy than, it would also be useful to understand how, in each patient perspective, it can be achieved trough therapy (Rennie, 2010) .

We want to stress the relevance of qualitative research about ordinary people perspectives' which, as the study just showed, can make a contribution to the theory of Well-being and the relation between Well-being and the several processes or psychological interventions that we may want to study.

Despite qualitative studies do not aim at generalisations, they can provide with significant insights to rethink and reframe our theoretical models that should than be tested with different types of research designs. It is important to stress that the specific design and procedures have to potentiate participants' reflexivity by creating favourable conditions that allow people to elaborate on their experiences and perspectives, as well as feeling confident in expressing their views. Reflexivity is also needed to adequately analyse those contributions; all these methodological careful procedures are, unfortunately, very resources consuming.

The question we have to ask though it is if there are other ways of researching ordinary people's perspectives in such depth that give us confidence to validate results. If not, I believe that resources are in the end paid back.

These studies will possibly bring further depth and clarity to the construct of Well-being, and to the way it relates to other psychological or even physical processes, that so many of us in this scientific meeting, are quite interested in.

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